

**"Britain and the World
at the Dawn of 2010"**
Report of a New Year's Listening Post
held in London on 13th January



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post, participants were invited to identify, contribute and explore their experiences in their various social roles be those in work, unemployed or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood or voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities. This part was largely concerned with what might be called 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', that relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In this part, the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. From several presented these have been drawn together under the following interrelated themes:

- Morality and Ambiguity
- Continuity, Memory and Cycles of Change
- Apocalypse and Disillusionment

1. Morality and Ambiguity

I am disappointed how quickly people have started to rubbish Obama. What is this moaning about? They say: Why is Guantanamo not yet closed? Why are we so quick to judge failure? His campaign and his calmness affected our fantasies about heroes.

Obama has the strength of not trying to slay the Republican or Iranian enemy. He can understand the other which gives me hope. He has resisted idealisation and I admire him for that.

My recollection is that there was a fantasy – we projected onto him. But he was saying it's not just about me it's about what we can achieve together.

The media drives an abrogation of personal responsibility – not recognising ambivalence and complexity.

I have a moan about the Health & Safety society. Schools did not close because of bad weather when I was young. I am in child protection, but I cannot bear it any more.

Ed Balls said we should forget H&S and just get on with it. But if it goes all wrong, who picks up the tab?

Morality is difficult to get hold of. Some say it's common sense that schools should close. Others say keeping them open is common sense. I am aware of a lot a puritanical

attitudes – simplistic taking of sides – as in the Northern Ireland scandal. I find it vexing that people do not see the ambiguity.

My worries are about what is happening in the public sector. Local Government is expecting a 20% cut in budgets. Things people rely on may go. Where I work we had a fatality – death from hypothermia. I worry about adverse publicity. There are fewer resources but more regulation. I have a sense of putting on my calm face in order to help colleagues and clients contain their anxiety.

There is smoke and mirrors at the political level. False reassurances about: We won't cut our way out of the recession. I don't think people understand the depth of the public debt. There are going to be 20% cuts year on year in our universities and public services.

On the one hand society is driven by image and consumption. On the other hand there are the lies and spinning about the mess we are in. Politicians do not tell the truth.

2. Continuity, Memory and Cycles of Change

I am part of the Senior Management Team of a 300 year old organisation. Our corporate ancestors would also have faced changes since 1701. There is some link in the DNA as we react to circumstances we cannot control. How do we cut a path through the changes but remain true to our core values? There are huge frustrations but also some excitement.

I am struck by the Power of Yes. The lack of memory. Banks were run by people who did not remember the crash. The woman who saved Ann Frank's diary died at 100 years of age on the day a TV documentary on Ann Frank was broadcast. Our greediness compares with the awfulness of the Second World War. Is there a cycle of excess based on greed followed by disaster? Disaster movies seem to be in fashion.

My children know they need 40 earths to sustain their life style. Primark is run by a very rich Irish family – their goods are cheap but where are the sweat shops behind it? I go to lectures in the City comparing Pepys diary with today's parallels. He speaks of profound overwhelming changes in his day. The generation which went through the War did not speak about it until just before they died.

The other side of the apocalyptic mood is that the West End seems full of old time musicals.

The war effort phrase is interesting. Women did their bit – working for the Red Cross or keeping the steel works going – though they were not thanked for it until very recently.

I heard of a professor who is collecting diaries. Young people say they are over – it's now blogging. But a diary is a private thing whereas blogs are public.

My mother loves her grand children. So I gave her a computer so she could keep in touch by email as we are miles away. She is phobic about it and does not try to use it.

I tried Facebook – spilled myself into the world. But then I thought about the boundary between the private self.

I was disappointed that Belle de Jour revealed her identity. I was rather hoping that people would think it was me.

Wikipedia does not require entries to be authenticated.

Is there real authenticity? Did the good old days ever really exist when things were really authentic?

That's the complexity. Some things are better now, others are worse.

3. *Apocalypse and Disillusionment*

Another decade has started. I am shocked at how quickly ten years has gone. Now mobile phone and internet are central to my working life in a way I would not have dreamt 10 years ago. I saw David Hare's play the Power of Yes. One character talks about what it was like to be on the board of a bank. Everyone said yes to everything. But how quickly have I said yes to all this new technology. This is disturbing because I think I am a thoughtful person.

I am daunted by the new decade and cannot think what changes it will bring.

Communism was born in response to the Industrial Revolution and was killed off by Globalisation. There are powerful forces at work. I think the next big force will be China. They are now impervious to appeals from Obama or Brown. They resisted Copenhagen. They executed the British drug dealer. Now they are interfering with Google. They could pull the plug on the US and UK economies as they own so many of the West's assets as well as assets in Africa and the Americas. Within ten years the dollar will not be the world currency.

Globalisation for me means cooperation. China could implode if it does not deal with its internal problems. I could get excited about what could happen.

The chancellor has now come out and said we will have to cut. For the last 10 or 20 years government has spent a huge amount of money. No one was saying Hold on a minute, where is this money coming from? Bush and Blair liberated the markets to an incredible degree. Mark Stein's paper at the OPUS conference showed how regulations put in place after the Great Depression were steadily demolished.

Thatcher was part of this. She seemed to understand having a global role.

It was also us – we were all willing to go along with it. We all enjoyed the goodies.

The younger generation were brainwashed into the normality of borrowing and debt. They never questioned it. Our children were seduced by the money culture. There is the willingness of banks to go on offering credit even though people have a bad track record in paying. Evil is in the manipulation of the vulnerable.

We seem to have lost touch with how to monitor politicians. Globalisation by taking things outside national boundaries also takes it outside democratic control. The banking thing was crazy. Were none of us in our right minds?

I am worrying about those dying of the cold and my own penury. It is hard to talk about our own mortality and vulnerability. We do without things, others complain so readily. We need to look at climate change and poverty. We are all in it.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts One and Two, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here the members were working more with what might be called their 'psycho' or 'internal' world. Their collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1: Post war hedonism and loss of community

Analysis

The generation of leaders who have run the political system and banking system for the last 20 or 30 years grew up in the world of the welfare state. It was a world in which anything seemed possible. Economic growth became the standard view. Brown claimed the days of boom and bust to be over. There was an unwillingness to learn from the past. If anything there was a wilful dismantling of the regulatory safeguards which were put in place after the Great Depression. The generation which endured the Second World War did not speak of the horrors they experienced until just before they died. Harold Macmillan said in the 1950's: You Britons have never had it so good. The atmosphere was hedonistic. Debt became not a horror as in the pre-war generation but a normal way of doing business and living life. This facade is now breaking down. Democracy seems to be a flimsy veil impotent to manage a global system beyond national boundaries or controls. Something seems to have been killed off in the last ten or twenty years – not just communism but communalism. We have become a society of individuals, consumer units, with little sense of mutuality or interdependence. There is no shared narrative because of the diversity of our cities. With many different ethnic, cultural and religious groups, each with their own story to tell, there is a frustration around how we develop a single world view. We have outsourced the difficult areas of life such as looking after the elderly. Even the developing nations have aspirations to follow the west, when we look to them as still having what we lost – a sense of community.

Hypothesis

Because the post war generation grew up in a welfare state, members of society behaved in an increasingly unquestioning hedonistic way in which anything seemed to be possible; but the result has been a loss of community with which to deal with the difficulties and global changes we now face.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2: Complexity and Control

Analysis

There is a tendency to reach for anachronistic solutions in the face of complex and increasing levels of change. There is often a lack of understanding or a desire to simplify what is complicated. There is nostalgia for the 'water cooler' moment, when everyone would be talking about the TV programme seen the night before. Now there is such a multiplicity of channels, there is difficulty in choosing which to watch. The big events on TV now tend to be mind numbing reality shows. On the other hand there are attempts to make use of the new technologies to develop other ways of analysing what is going on, and make connections with other people. Social networking sites, blogs and twitters are examples of this. Shanghai seems to be computer mad. Some recent research into the development of the brain shows that young people in the Far East have developed much faster than others. The University of Berkley admits students on the basis of

psychometric testing, and a high percentage of the intake is from the Far East. There are some efforts to earth global initiatives in local small scale organisations. Tackling sub Saharan poverty or climate change for instance needs inter governmental action, but also needs the political support base of citizens' action for politicians to make it a priority. The end of communism came about because ordinary people got together to break down the Berlin wall. But with the collapse of communism there seems also to have been a collapse of collective action. Everyone has gone for the capitalist model which now is seen to be in trouble. The collapse of economies means that there is an uncertain future in terms of public services which may have to be cut back severely. There is a loneliness and isolation experienced by many in the west. There also seems to be an inability to grasp the complexity of the changes taking place. In Shanghai you can see kilometre on kilometre of identical high rise tower blocks. On the one hand this uniformity seems awful. On the other hand what an incredible achievement on the part of the Chinese to build on such a scale. China has centralised control to manage its massive population. They introduced the one child policy. Many of those children now live in the new housing developments, while their parents remain in the countryside. Are we looking back to some idealised view of happy families in the past? Many more choices are coming about as a result of scientific and technological change such as genetic engineering.

Hypothesis

Because there is so much complexity and rapid change, members of society are struggling to come to terms with and find ways of controlling this new emerging world. It is difficult to anticipate what the next ten years may bring, and so imagination is defeated in trying to prepare for what needs to be done. Some small scale initiatives are taken but often seem inadequate to the scale of the problems faced. The result is that people can feel overwhelmed by hopelessness and apocalyptic feelings.

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